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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/11/2017
TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CRITICIZES ROKG FOR MISHANDLING
USFK CAMP RETURNS

Classified By: Pol M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (U) Summary. On June 25-26, the ROK National Assembly's Committee on Environment and Labor held a hearing on the clean up of returned USFK bases, expressing strongly critical views on the environmental conditions of those bases. Current and former top officials from the ROKG, including Foreign Minister Song Min-soon and Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo, defended their handling of the camp returns process, arguing that the ROKG had been bound by requirements of the SOFA agreements and desired to avoid damaging the U.S.-ROK Alliance with continued, contentious debate. The National Assembly released a report on the hearing on June 29, identifying "problem" areas in the camp return process and calling on the ROKG to pursue future returns based on domestic ROK environmental standards, rather than the SOFA, and revise the SOFA environmental procedures. Although the report's recommendations are not legally-binding on the ROKG, they are likely to complicate the way forward on future camp returns. END SUMMARY.

MND AND MOFAT DEFEND USFK CAMP RETURNS

12. (U) Former Defense Minister Yoon Kwang-Woong and current Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo testified on June 25. Representative Woo Won-shik (an independent lawmaker who recently left the pro-government Uri party) claimed that 10 of the 23 U.S. bases returned to Korea had the remains of electronic transformers containing levels of toxic chemicals such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) exceeding the nation's environmental standards. Woo also argued that PCBs were included in a list of toxic chemicals USFK had pledged to clean up before the bases were returned. The most vocal critic to date, Woo then charged that camp return discussions in the Security Policy Initiative (SPI) forum were invalid as they violated SOFA agreements. He called for nullifying the base return pact and renegotiating the matter.

13. (SBU) DM Kim Jang-soo maintained that it was his personal decision to accept the returned camps, as well as any ROKG costs for additional environmental remediation, in order to prevent the camp returns issue from causing further damage to the U.S.-ROK Alliance. The discourse between National Assembly lawmakers and MND officials became increasingly tense through the course of the hearings, with lawmakers at

one point calling MND officials "ignorant." NA lawmakers also accused MND of pushing a unilateral environmental deal with the U.S. and pandering to U.S. demands despite what they deemed to be an "astronomical" cost involved in cleaning up the camps.

14. (SBU) Foreign Minister Song and DG Cho Byung-jae testified on June 26. FM Song's introductory remarks delineated the evolution of the SOFA, including how the original agreements had been amended to account for the changing needs of the South Korean public. (NOTE: This includes the non-binding 2001 Memorandum of Special Understandings (MOSU) on Environmental Protection which confirms U.S. policy to promptly undertake to remedy contamination caused by U.S. Armed Forces in Korea that poses a "KISE," or "Known, Imminent and Substantial Endangerment" to human health, and to consider additional measures required to protect human health.) Song, in his introduction, emphasized that while the results of contamination remediation on the U.S. side did not satisfy the standards set by South Korean laws, it was more important to note that the ROK is unique in that the U.S. government invests funds from its own budget into providing environmental remediation at its bases. He noted as an example that South Korea would not send troops to a country and expect its troops to comply strictly with domestic law, so it is therefore not reasonable to expect the U.S. to comply with the ROK domestic standard for environmental remediation. Rather, Song noted, it is more appropriate for the two countries to comply with their established agreements. FM Song emphasized that the ROKG had done its best to secure the return of the camps. He stressed that the U.S. had done more in terms of environmental remediation in Korea than in any other country where the U.S. forces were located, referring specifically to the MOSU and

the 8 alpha items conducted by the U.S. (NOTE: 8 alpha refers to the stipulation that the U.S. clean up eight types of equipment/facilities, including oil storage tanks, used transformers, and air conditioning/heating systems, while the alpha refers to bioslurping, or eliminating petroleum "free product" floating on underground water.)

15. (U) MOFAT provided copies of the SOFA Joint Committee documents on the camp returns for the National Assembly members to review at the hearing and retrieved all of the copies at the end. The Committee Chair Hong Jun-pyo (a GNP presidential candidate) acknowledged that while MOFAT did not "release" the SOFA documents in question, they did "provide" them, which could be interpreted to have sufficed for the NA requirement calling for the production of such documents for Committee examination.

16. (C) In the following Q&A session, FM Song referred to several new MOFAT proposals, requesting consultations in the Joint Committee to 1) revise the 1967 Procedures for Operation of the Joint Committee and Subcommittees, which require both sides' prior agreement to publicly release SOFA documents; 2) clarify the environmental standards for camp returns as specified in the 2001 Memorandum of Special Understandings on Environmental Protection; and 3) improve the Tab A process for future camp returns, specifying that ROK agencies be allowed an additional pre-return ROKG visit to confirm the environmental condition of camps. MOFAT contacts characterized their proffered actions as "non-commitments" because of the lack of legal force, but recognized that ROK ministries would feel obligated to comply if it was a NA statement. In response to several lawmakers, questions about revising the SOFA, Song immediately dismissed the inquiries by stating it would be unrealistic to attempt to do so.

17. (C) However, the National Assembly's Environment and Labor Committee released a report on June 29 that criticized ROKG handling of camp returns. The report also outlined three objectives for future negotiations on camp returns, calling for 1) remediation of U.S. bases to be conducted in accordance with current SOFA environmental provisions based on ROK domestic environmental standards and subject to ROKG

verification; 2) the ROKG to begin negotiations for SOFA revision as soon as possible; and 3) the costs for remediation of the already returned camps to be deducted from ROKG contributions to the Special Measures Agreement (SMA). The report is not legally binding and is not the view of the entire National Assembly, only that of a majority of the 15-member committee. According to MOFAT SOFA Affairs Division contacts, the report temporarily allows for sustained camp returns under the current SOFA provisions, but MOFAT may eventually need to take steps toward proposing SOFA revisions to placate the National Assembly.

LIMITED PRESS COVERAGE

18. (SBU) The South Korean public's attention to the environmental condition of the returned camps was piqued most recently with video clips of National Assembly lawmakers igniting wooden sticks that had been dipped in oil found in the ground at one of the returned camps. In the lead up to the NA hearings, the press reports portrayed MND and MOFAT as unilaterally accepting the camp returns to appease the U.S., implying that the ROKG was compelled to acquiesce to U.S. demands in the SPI, instead of forcing USFK to keep up its end of the bargain on environmental remediation. Since the hearings, mainstream press coverage of the issue has been limited. A recent Korea Times editorial was critical of the financial repercussions of the ROKG's decision to accept return of the camps, and an editorial in the left-leaning Hankyoreh newspaper called for an overhaul of the SOFA agreement that would require USFK environmental remediation to the level of ROK domestic standards; the Hankyoreh editorial painted USFK as a criminal polluter by resurrecting images from the hit South Korean film "The Host," in which a mutant monster terrorizes Seoul after the U.S. military (allegedly) dumped toxic chemicals into the Han River. A recent public opinion poll also indicated that 51.3 percent

of the ROK public believes that the U.S. should pay the cost of environmental remediation at the camps.

COMMENT

19. (C) MND and MOFAT officials managed to pull off a middle-of-the-road strategy, defending their agencies' handling of the camp returns process, making both lawmakers and USFK partially, but far from completely, satisfied. In taking personal responsibility for the "sake of the Alliance," DM Kim lived up to earlier promises to the U.S. to take the heat on camp returns, but also told the NA that the ROKG had no better choice than to accept the responsibility for the camps. FM Song's approach was more legalistic, giving a detailed overview of the SOFA documents governing camp returns, but not quite explicitly acknowledging that the camp returns were handled in compliance with the required environmental procedures as outlined in the SOFA. Overall, the SOFA itself was given the bulk of the blame by the ROKG and the NA Committee. We can now expect MOFAT officials to at least go through the act of pursuing SOFA revisions or improvements in the implementation of the camp returns process in order to placate National Assembly critics. END COMMENT.
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